

RPG Reload File 033 – 'Across Age DX'

[April 9, 2015](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we often learn a thing or two about cultural differences. Each week, we head back in time through non-magical means and play an RPG from the App Store's past. It's a chance to revisit some old favorites, reflect on their place in the history of mobile gaming, or just to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow. In my efforts to cover a genre wide enough to contain both *Wizardry* and *Yakuza*, I try to put together a pretty varied bag of RPGs as I go along. Even the best of us has blind spots, however, and I'm far from the best. That's where you fine people come in. Once per month, I throw the choice over to you. Simply comment below, post in [the Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#) with your suggestion, and you might see me playing it in the first week of May. Just think, you could make me play almost anything! Even *Shelterra The Skyworld* [\(\\$3.99\)](#)! Please don't make me play *Shelterra The Skyworld* again.

It's been a few months since we covered an action-RPG in this feature, with the last one being in December when I talked about *Bastion* [\(\\$4.99\)](#). I felt it was time to fix that, so this week we're taking a long look at FDG Entertainment and EXE-Create's time-traveling adventure *Across Age DX* [\(\\$3.99\)](#). This game comes from an era that seems like it was a long time ago, when the App Store seemed to be swimming in premium-priced action-RPGs, to the point that some people were likely exhausted. Most games in this vein are now set up as free-to-play titles, with *Across Age*'s 2014 sequel

looking like an oddball for being a paid game with no in-app purchases at all. Well, that's a game for another **Reload**. For now, let's take a closer look at one of the better action-RPGs still available on the App Store today.



Originally released in February of 2010 for iPhone, *Across Age* represents a rather unusual collaboration between a Japanese developer and a German publisher. The publisher FDG Entertainment probably doesn't need many introductions on an iOS gaming site. They've been around in the iOS scene from nearly the beginning, releasing well-known titles such as *Slayin* ([\\$0.99](#)), *Oceanhorn* ([\\$6.99](#)), and *Banana Kong* ([Free](#)). The developer is steadfast Kemco associate EXE-Create, responsible for what are in my opinion the best games that publisher releases. Though FDG Entertainment acted in their usual publisher role, you can feel their influence on the game simply by nature of the game feeling different from other EXE-Create titles. The result is something a little bit more complete than what we often see out of the developer.

EXE-Create's history actually goes back farther than I'd assumed. *Across Age* certainly wasn't the first time they had put together an action-RPG. The

prolific, yet small, 14-person developer based in Osaka was founded in 1997 by ex-IREM employees who had worked on games such as the SNES platformer *Rocky Rodent*. The president of EXE-Create, Shinichi Yamamoto, had worked on at least one RPG during his time at IREM, the Japan-only Turbo-CD title *Sol Moonarge*. Initially, they did mostly software support for the SEGA Saturn, but about a year after the company's inception, they finally released their first game, *Idol Mahjong: Final Romance 4* for the SEGA Saturn. It was one of the many risque adult titles that filled the Saturn's later years in Japan, not far from a strip poker-style game. Well, everyone has to start somewhere.

Their next project was to develop a SEGA Saturn collection of games from renowned RPG developer Falcom, mostly famous in the West for the *Ys* and *Trails In The Sky* series. This collection contained the second game in the *Ys* series, so I guess we could say this is where EXE-Create got their action-RPG break. Perhaps following in the footsteps of Falcom, they began to develop more PC games, with their bread and butter being the *Frane* series. Consisting of four games heavily inspired by Falcom's *Ys*, their modest success helped set up EXE-Create's next big move, this time to the feature phone market that was taking off in Japan. A port of the third *Frane* game can be found on the App Store under the title *RPG Dragons Odyssey Frane* ([\\$5.99](#)), and playing it certainly shows how it informs many of the elements we'll see in *Across Age*.



After several years of living off of the feature phone market, where they launched many brands that are still in play today such as *Alphadia* and *Asdivine*, EXE-Create finally made the jump to smartphones with the release of *Across Age*. This title was also noteworthy in that it was the first time a game developed by EXE-Create was released worldwide. They would soon hook up with Kemco on an on-going basis, with almost all of their subsequent games getting English translations and worldwide releases. They would return to their partnership with FDG Entertainment just one more time, for *Across Age 2* ([\\$3.99](#)), but otherwise they have stuck to more traditional JRPG fare under the Kemco umbrella. It's a shame, because they have a real knack for action-RPG games, as *Across Age* shows.

Several months after the game's initial release, an HD version was released for the iPad. This version would later go universal and is the one you can find on the App Store today under the name *Across Age DX*. The *DX* points to more than just Retina graphics, however. There is also some extra content in the game in the form of a new dungeon with a challenging boss. *Across Age DX* had a *Lite* version at one point, and even a somewhat experimental low-priced version called *Across Age EX* that allowed you to play part of the

game before buying an IAP for the remainder. These were all pulled over time, leaving just the universal and complete *Across Age DX* for \$2.99. With the original *Inotia* and *Zenonia* games now gone from the App Store, this is perhaps the final remaining relic of that golden age of iOS action-RPGs.

Across Age tells the story of two young heroes joined by fate. Ales is a somewhat surly young warrior with the world's most obvious secret, while Ceska is an apprentice mage who is destined for greatness. The journey starts off innocently enough, with Ales arriving in town seeking the Grand Mage to help solve a serious problem. After being informed that the person he's seeking is none other than the young Ceska, he's taken aback. As proof, the two are sent off to a trial cave where Ceska will demonstrate her power. Her abilities will be needed to help put a stop to the machinations of an evil Count, who stole a precious magical artifact that allows him to manipulate time itself. Fortunately, Ceska has some time-traveling powers of her own, and the two set off to gather the needed items to put an end to the Count's plan.

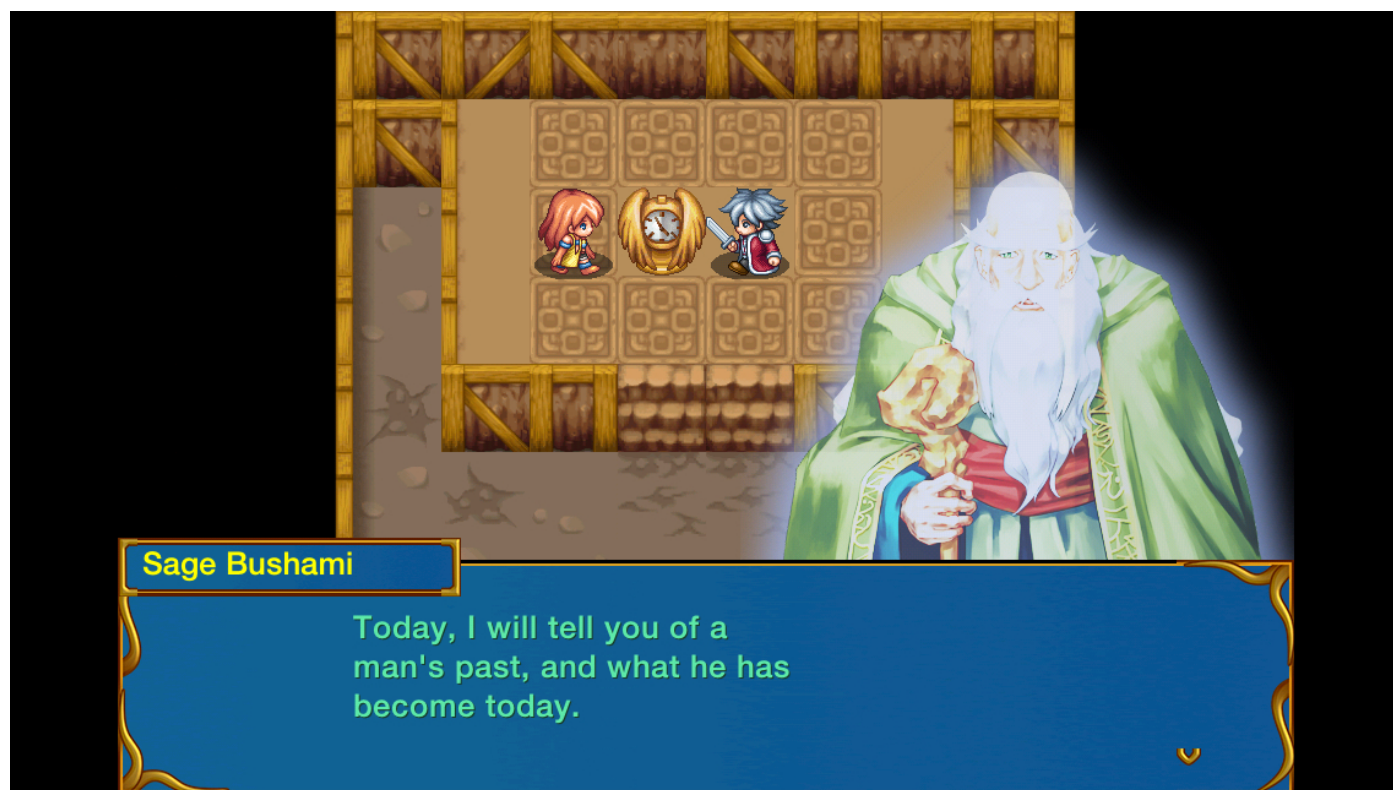


The time-traveling aspect is more than just a simple narrative gimmick.

Certain situations and puzzles in the game will require you to think fourth-dimensionally. For instance, there's a sage that you need to talk to somewhat early on, a quest hindered by the fact that the old codger has passed away. Fortunately, Ceska can just pop into the past and talk to him before his time is up. You'll also use time travel to restore old items into shiny new versions, age wine, and explore areas that have had layout changes over the years. It's a clever gimmick that is implemented fairly well. The game's other interesting system involves the fact that you control Ales and Ceska both. While this is a pretty standard action-RPG mechanically, the two characters will need to cooperate and at times take separate paths to make their way forward. Ales is a physical powerhouse, capable of pushing blocks, throwing objects, and tossing Grand Mages. Ceska has access to a variety of spells that work in different ways to remove obstacles and open new routes. The later dungeons and bosses make great use of this switching and separating mechanic to create some fairly complex situations.

You'll start in the game's only town, and it serves as sort of a central hub from which all other areas build out from. The map isn't very complicated, with each town exit more or less leading to one of the important areas you'll need to visit. There are a couple of instances where you'll have to backtrack, but for the most part, you'll only need to go through each area once provided you do it right. While the game seems non-linear, there will always only be a single new path to take as you go along. For the others, you'll need magic or items that you'll only find by taking the one route that's open to you. It's a bit like Nintendo's *Legend Of Zelda* in that way, albeit on a much smaller scale. The actual mechanics of the gameplay, however, more closely resemble *Ys*, particularly the second game. That's perhaps little surprise given the developer's history, and it's as good a template to pull from as any. In the spirit of that game, your initial melee attack is largely ineffective, but you'll soon have access to a fairly steady stream of ranged attacks. It's a good way to get around some of the fussy aiming that we can see in other titles from around the same period.

You can't just stick to one character, however. Even in combat, certain enemies are only susceptible to blade or sorcery, so you'll have to keep switching as the need arises. Ceska's attack is also limited by her magic points, so you can't just fire away willy-nilly. By the time you reach the end of the game, both characters will have gained so many levels that you can sort of get away with just blasting away with Ceska's default air shot, and you'll likely also have picked up an accessory that gives her shots a limited homing capability. That might feel like cheating, but there are still situations where numbers can overwhelm her, giving a reason to switch over to Ales and make use of some of his advanced sword techniques. You'll have to seek those out, though. They're largely optional and highly useful, so make sure to poke around on the overworld map and enter any suspicious caves.



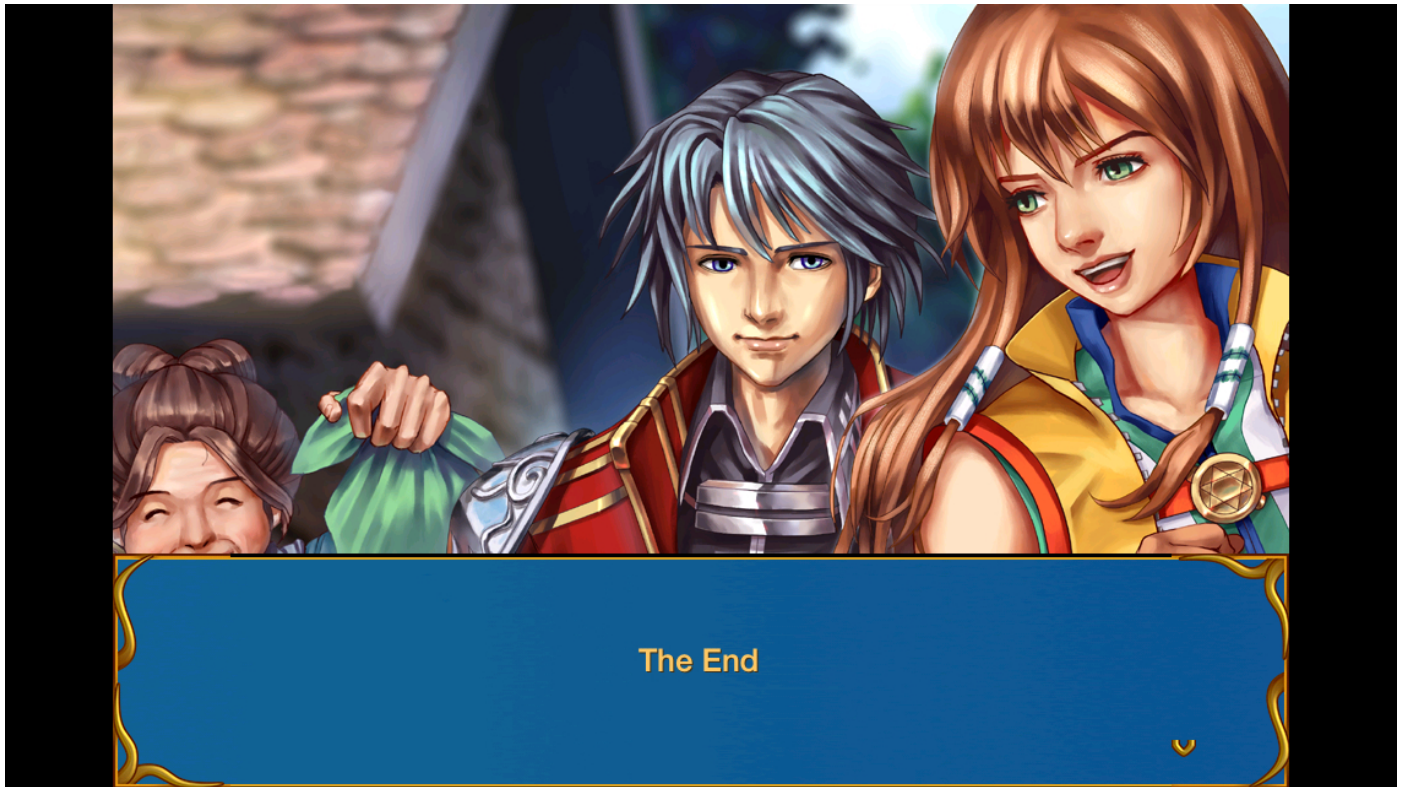
Although reasonably big for a portable action-RPG, *Across Age* is still somewhat small compared to classic games in the genre. There are only a handful of dungeons, few established characters, and around ten hours of playtime on your first run through. It's about the right length for the experience it offers, though. It doesn't drag on past the point of it becoming boring, and there are interesting new puzzles right up until the last part of

the game. It's easy to see why they took the route of a safe sequel, because there were still some things left to explore here. In its favor, it also doesn't end too quickly. All too often on iOS, we see ambitious beginnings give way to rushed endings. *Across Age* tells its story, and in terms of its design, it feels like it did just about everything it wanted to at a pace it was comfortable with. I could easily see a game in this series going for a much bigger experience, but this isn't that game.

While the gameplay is solid and the overall plot is fun, if a bit too predictable, EXE-Create dropped the ball on something they're usually very good with. The characters in *Across Age* are pretty lousy all-around. Oh, don't get me wrong, the game has a very good translation, though this developer's games usually do. Ales and Ceska are fine, though they're the usual antagonistic future couple that shows up way too often in these kinds of stories. It's just that there are only a few characters of any consequence outside of those two, and they're almost universally awful. The main villain's motivations are extremely flimsy, though there are moments of intrigue to be found in his mustache-twirling show. His suggestion that the Royal Family has used the very artifact he stole to manipulate the past in their favor is compelling, but it's barely followed up on in this game.

Your allies are even worse. The Sage is your basic exposition device, telling you what you need to do and where you need to go. His introduction is clever but after that he might as well be an omnipotent narrator. Then there's Captain Hawk, the shameless knock-off of Captain Jack Sparrow, complete with a not-quite-infringing theme song. He more or less serves as a *deus ex machina* for when the heroic pair are in a real pinch. He knows more than he lets on, but we don't get to find out his deal in this first game, either. Finally, there's Violet. Imagine if Jack from 90s sitcom *Will & Grace* were a buff, bomb-building monk, and you've got Violet. In a game full of silly stereotypes, he's probably the worst of the lot. One of the story's dramatic turns centers on Violet, but it's impossible to take it seriously when he's pretty much got his hand down his pants at all times. I'm not against using a

stereotype here and there for a quick gag, but Violet has a pretty major role in the story and he's doing the same tired routine almost 100% of the time.



Still, it's not like this is a genre known for great characters. Heck, the poster boy for action-RPGs is a kid who has baffling issues with poultry and a penchant for communicating in yelps and grunts. And EXE-Create does make better use of Violet and the rest of the extended cast in the second game, for the most part anyway. It's just too bad that one of their most consistent strengths didn't come through in this particular game. Even with that part not quite working out, *Across Age* is a really good game. It's an easy one to lose yourself in, convincing yourself to play just a bit longer to get the next item, clear the next dungeon, or gain the next level. It's a game that I've replayed more than a few times, one of only a small group of iOS-original RPGs I can say that about.

I wouldn't be able to replay it so often were it not for how regularly the app is kept up to date. *Across Age* has received numerous updates over the years. While the initial improvements to controls and graphics that came with the *DX* version are the most obvious of them, FDG has also quietly updated the

app with each new version of iOS and the corresponding hardware to make sure things are working. It needs another update, though, because I was having some serious crashing problems late in the game. Every once in a while, I had to completely restart my iPhone to avoid crashes when I hit the menu buttons. It's a lucky thing the game bookmarks your position when you change rooms or enter a new area, because the regular save option was booting me to the home screen more than half the time in the last two hours of this replay. The last update was only a few months ago, to accommodate the iPhone 6 family, so I'm sure the problem will be sorted out sooner or later.

That's just my take on *Across Age*. What do you think of the game? I want to know your thoughts on this classic, so please comment below, post in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#). Please don't forget to vote while you're at it, or we're going to have a super-boring reader's choice article next month! I'd also like to point you at [the latest episode](#) of the **RPG Reload Podcast**, which covers SEGA's *Shining Force* ([\\$0.99](#)). Eric Ford and I had a great chat, and you've just got to check out our new theme song from reader/listener Sweetdiss. As for me, I'll be back next week with another great RPG. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *Stretching the definition of 'RPG' once again.*